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The Warmest Low Reader
THE DEEP BLUE SEA
(Limited Edition One)

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FOREWORD

Written by Tracy Diamond

Though writing may be calculated vulnerability, language has a spirit that floats through us. We carry our joy, our heartbreak and our gravity. Perhaps the test of life is to live through pain, then let each experience become what it must. I think about all of these things while reading Jordannah Elizabeth's work. I also repeat Tracy K. Smith's line from *Duende*, "Flesh is the first literature."

Duende is a Spanish term of creative embodiment. Impossible to replicate, seeping in like the water, Elizabeth writes with *duende* in *The Warmest Low Reader: The Deep Blue Sea*. Elizabeth summons the living spirit of Baltimore, showing the reader how the misty days permeate more than the air. Elizabeth's spirit, her ability to see and describe in a personal way led me to ask, "How do you decide what to give to your readers?" at the launch of her chapbook in November 2018.

I cannot recite lines from the event, but I can tell you there was a creative bubbling in the air of the Motor House that evening. Amorous Ebony, Theresa Columbus, Cierra Lione, Lauren H. Smith, and I spilled in a way that filled my bones with fire. Jordannah curated a performance, but I don't want to call it performance because our words were becoming flesh as Jordannah does in her own writing. We were all supposed to be there and our creative energy lapped the walls.

What are we to express or shroud in the name of communicating to a reader? Jordannah opens the reader to her creative process. In *The Warmest Low Reader: The Deep Blue Sea*, while admitting her pain while growing up Black and different in Baltimore City. Every piece of Baltimore and herself is distilled in *Reader*. She investigates her background—the loss of her best friend and her relationship to her surroundings. *Reader* lets us sit with the Warmest Low in a way that Jordannah was sitting with herself

while writing *The Warmest Low: Chapbook One Limited Edition Two* (the first book of the Warmest Low Series), “It is not about getting up, it is about nestling into the warm underbelly of a love lost. This is about growing callous and ignoring the pain. This is about the human feeling and the reality that endings don’t exist...only stories exist. Answers and explanations are of no consequence to healing.” What follows us makes us writers, and more importantly, people.

Reader is a collection of linear notes adding depth to Chapbook One. Reader tells you to sit on the floor with a notebook next to you and headphones hugging your ears. Sitting and listening may seem indulgent in our society, but it may be the only way to be true in our flesh. It may be the only way to build empathy. Elizabeth’s work compels you to think deeply about support systems and how we build our networks. As she writes in Reader, “We are built from our surroundings, chosen and accidental. Situations can become toxic. Situations can heal. Location means something to our cells, our minds.” Dive into her language and pause as you need to while reading The Warmest Low series.

I followed the butterflies and water in Elizabeth’s writing. They provide a striking metaphor, and their boundaries are amorphous. We build our flesh to protect ourselves, but the fortresses can crack. As people, this may be our most important skill: communicating even if we are unsure as we adapt and tell our stories and allow our boundaries to be fluid. Even when plagued by uncertainty and grief, Jordannah Elizabeth writes her way through her story. Perhaps communicating and listening is all we can ever ask to do with this piece of literature.

Welcome to The Warmest Low Reader: The Deep Blue Sea.

Tracy Dimond is the author of four chapbooks as well as her debut poetry collection, EMOTION INDUSTRY (2025).

PREFACE

In my mind, the interesting thing about *The Warmest Low* is that nothing about it was planned. It was born out of a series of simple conversations, but the weather was the initial catalyst for the title.

The spark of the idea for *The Warmest Low* series derived when the vague, yet loving (in their own way), antagonist announced after just waking up, “The weatherman said it’s going to be the warmest low today,” meaning that in December 2015, a record was set for having the warmest low temperature in many years.

The *Baltimore Sun* reported on December 26, 2015, “Baltimore set three new temperature records on Christmas Eve and on its second-warmest Christmas Day on record, surging into the 70s both days and only cooling to 58 degrees. The region spent nearly all of Christmas Eve at temperatures warmer than what was a record high for Dec. 24 for decades.”

After doing some research, and reflecting on the continuation of this series and how to move forward from *The Warmest Low* (Chapbook One), I realized that the warmer temperatures were why I saw a full-adult monarch butterfly flying around in the city in the middle of winter — the encounter I wrote about in the first chapbook. Not being a meteorologist, I couldn’t believe that an adult butterfly could survive in December, no matter the weather.

The North American Butterfly Association explains on their website, “In areas where temperatures drop below freezing during part of the winter, at least one stage in a butterfly species’ life cycle must be resistant to freezing if the species is resident. Most butterflies that live in cold climates spend the winter as caterpillars, while almost as many spend the winter as pupas.”

Most monarchs migrate in the winter to warmer areas like central Mexico, beginning their migration from northeastern areas in Canada and the United States in September and October.

I used to raise butterflies and moths as a little girl. My brothers and I would choose a caterpillar and put it in a jar with plenty of sugar, and watch it grow into its full adult stage. Then, we would release it to live outside in its natural environment. So, I had a little bit of experience with the insects, making the butterfly's appearance feel like a mystical omen, along with an environmental anomaly. My confusion came from an odd mix of meteorological inexperience and my novice understanding of etymology.

In having time to look back on a piece of writing like (Chapbook One), which was so ethereal, mystical and disorienting to me when I was writing it, I began to realize that there were also very logical connections to be made in regard to the story.

Now, three years later, after a whirlwind of touring and the first book of the series becoming a bit aged and settled in, I obtained some perspective, and I wanted to take the time to look at the hidden historical gems of (Chapbook One) before I move on with the mystical tone of this series in (Chapbook Two) and beyond. This is my reason for creating Reader.

Don't get me wrong — I truly respect where my mind was at that point in time when I was writing the booklet. And it won't be hard to jump back into the unique tone of the story as the series forges ahead.

But for this Reader, I simply plan to be myself, where I am now. Maybe some won't notice a difference between my writing in this book and its previous counterpart, just like when the American spiritual guru, Ram Dass (born Richard Alpert), went to meet a

friend after years of deep meditation and travel in India, only to be told, “Dick, you haven’t changed a bit!” (Ram Dass was a big inspiration for The Warmest Low series. Excerpts of his lectures appear in the first chapbook, as I often listened to the audio versions in 2015 and still do.)

So, what do I know? Maybe I’m just the same, but I will reiterate that there are some historical, geological, meteorological perceptions I felt I had to explore. They have become an important layer to the story I needed to share. My relationship with my surroundings is very important to me, even more so as I grow older and more aware.

The creation of The Warmest Low (Art Basel Edition), an out-of-print seed and raw prototype of this series, was driven by emotion, and by an invitation to present a piece of artwork at Art Basel in Miami, FL. It was the last stop on an eight-month international tour I embarked on in 2016. Because of exhaustion, I never actually made it to the prestigious arts festival.

When I returned home from the tour in December 2016, I hurried to edit another edition of The Warmest Low, hence the importance of adding “(Chapbook One) Limited Edition Two” to the title of the first book.

I worked on (Chapbook One) with the help of editor Michael Martino, and very small runs of the (Art Basel Edition) in its original form and (Chapbook One) were printed, bound by my own hands, and released through Publik / Private Small Press, a boutique press I created just to release The Warmest Low series on my own terms, completely DIY.

Both books premiered at the Publications and Multiples Fair in Baltimore at The Baltimore Design School on April 1, 2017. Red

Emma's Bookstore took me on and made the books available at their booth. To my surprise, the book sold out in an hour.

They continued to sell well locally for a number of months.

The reason why this Reader is called The Deep Blue Sea is simply because of my adoration for the Chesapeake Bay. It's a body of water that is far from perfect, but it is beautiful in its own way, just the way life is. I think we're all caught up. I hope you enjoy The Warmest Low Reader: The Deep Blue Sea.

THE DEEP BLUE SEA

I

There is a harbor by the sea, the Atlantic Ocean to be exact, not a sea. Maybe some would consider the harbor to be large. I don't actually know how big it is compared to others because I live in the city of Baltimore, where the Chesapeake Bay's prominence is overshadowed — submerged and surrounded by shops, boats, tourists, houses, roads, parks and college campuses. It would be easy to research exactly how large the harbor is compared to others, but it's okay not to know everything. It's okay not to be precise with every detail.

I was brought into the world in Baltimore City in 1986, when the crack crisis and drug epidemic descended on Black communities all over the country like a lightning bolt. But I was born with a sweet face, small eyes, curly brown hair and a soft heart. I knew nothing of what was going on around me. My little body, with brown skin and almond eyes, survived at the mercy of larger hands.

There was a tiny metropolis plagued with trauma from the consequences of the Confederacy. Some felt it was good and others bad. Because I was born Black, I cannot say it is of no consequence to me. Now that I am big, I have to be aware. Good jobs are harder to come by. I have to prove myself over and over again just to be let in, and any validation I receive, I do not take it to heart. Being Black in Baltimore, you cannot take adoration to heart because many times, there is an agenda. Professionally, if there is an acute and desperate need for a skill that cannot be found by anyone else, then one is brought in, but the pay is dismal.

Being born near the bay, on the coast of the polluted edges of the Atlantic under big skies gazed upon by red eyes and the colonized,

privileged descendants of Robert E. Lee's pillaging, one has to wonder if the sky looks any different via the beholder. Because the sky is so big though, and has a tendency to become an endearing light blue with big fluffy clouds, there may be days when the entire city who lives by the bay can live in a collective positive consensus simply because of its beauty. But there are other days when the sky is an unpleasant grey, overlaid with thick fog and icy mist, urging people to become edgy. This is where the city's dissonance can come into play. Some may find the sky dreary, while others, a good opportunity to stay in and read. It depends on the economic privilege, as some people in the city don't have homes or books. A light blue sky brings freedom to all, the rich and poor; a dreary one brings opportunity for plush laziness or a desperate discomfort, and an urgency to find shelter. It isn't very complex — this small city is actually very simple, but no one seems able to explain how it functions and why it is the way it is, though many try.

I have no need to attempt to explain it in literature, for fear of solidifying many people's negatives of the city or to appease humans from a far-off land's ill-informed curiosity. I think it may be better to acknowledge Baltimore's mysteriousness, and then allow a pause for one's contemplation. That's all I am personally willing to do, out of fear that one or many may take my ideas of Baltimore as an opportunity to skew and further vilify its mysterious, and therefore misunderstood, social, cultural and economic conundrums. It already endures enough of that. I do not want to idealize and compose an emotional ode because although I feel deeply connected to my hometown, I choose to be different and wear a cloak of cool detachment. Depth, for me, only lives in the sea, and the problems and triumphs in Baltimore are meant to be lived, discussed and hopefully cured, not simply analyzed by my written words.

II

I write lightly about my birth somewhat often when I sit down to write a story. I allude to it, not to the fact that it happened, but just that I was there. I've never really asked too many questions about it. The fact that I was chosen by some happenstance to be born in Baltimore seems a bit ironic due to its reputation. My countenance doesn't really match up with the global consciousness' view of this place. All the time, I am asked where I am from in my own city. It makes me feel like a bit of an outsider even though for some time, this was the only place I knew. My presence, accent and mannerisms tend to lead people to believe I'm different from my own community. It hurts me more often than not, and it makes me want to run. But this is my home. The desire to run away from home is abnormal; I mean, it's not innate. There has to be a reason for one to want to leave their home, and even though there are many good reasons that could spark the desire, I believe it is more common for a runaway to feel alienated in some way.

Since I was very small, I felt alienated because I was different. It would be irresponsible for me to ignore that my differentness may have something to do with my gift of writing. Writers are different, but of course, that's just me trying to distance myself from my pain — admitting that writers are all a bit far out. I can make a nice quip about it and move on, but I suspect that I sat down to write at this very moment because I am tired of creating quick quips. I'm tired of alluding to things. I should call a thing a thing, but the only problem is, if I truly don't want to allude at all, I have to pinpoint my pain. And I have to ask myself, "Am I really in pain because I am different?"

I rarely have the opportunity to explore this question because of my "success." Accomplishment tends to wash away one's misgivings about themselves. The higher you climb in public realms, other people don't want to know about it, and if you show any signs of social imperfection or

insecurity, you are criticized and brought down to size by the press and your envious onlookers.

At any opportunity, any slip of a messy emotional disposition or indiscretion, you are described as “trouble(d)” at the very least. I wouldn’t describe myself as trouble(d). I would describe myself as someone who does not have many opportunities to be un-calculatingly vulnerable. My intelligence dismisses the lack of calculation because without it, I would not be on time for anything. My life is forged by deadlines, and I pursued a career of time sensitivity because I wouldn’t know what to do with myself otherwise. I would probably make a less structured form of art. I would probably laze about, walking slowly down side streets feeling indifferent, but either way, I would evade my pain the best I could. I don’t feel I have a choice because I cannot change being different. I don’t mean just sitting outside of the status quo. I mean truly living by a very personal set of rules and hunches that have nothing to do with anyone but myself, which I can’t change because I cannot identify with people who adhere to what Western society tells them to do — so I have no way to really imitate it. You cannot imitate what you don’t connect with. I can have emotional empathy for the human condition, but when it comes to seeing the world compared to the mass status quo of survival, I have a difficult time fitting in.

Don’t get me wrong. I am a good citizen, and I pay my taxes and show up to work. I call my mother and look out for my friends, but no one can deny that there is something about me that is unheard of. It does me well when I lecture, but it hurts me on a very deep level in my personal moments.

Being looked upon as if my way of the world is new and exciting, and something to adapt to by people who want to live “more freely” is nice, but my mundaneness is exciting to others, which is very odd. If being different is exciting to others, then again, there is no room for my pain. Maybe I’ll receive a light apology if I allude

to my experience. Sometimes, I get asked, “Why didn’t you tell me? I would have done something to make you more comfortable (I would have invited more Black people),” but that’s not what I mean. More Black people is always wonderful, but that’s not what I always mean. It is nothing to be fixed, and my comfort ebbs and flows like anyone else’s. Maybe it’s the deep blue sea, polluted and shabby for many miles offshore. Maybe I’m so connected with its awareness and its pain that I just can’t shake it. Maybe it’s the temperamental sky and the aggressive traffic. Maybe it’s nothing at all.

The most important thing is that I cannot do anything about myself. There is nothing to change. It feels like all I can do is do away with the desire to change. This is very dangerous territory, and I’m sure many psychoanalysts would disagree because change is good, but they would also agree that wanting to change an innate uniqueness is not healthy. It’s a bit of a catch-22. But I guess that words and opinions cannot destroy anyone unless they believe in their own image. An unfair criticism can only infuriate and intimidate one who believes that their choices and behavior are who they are at their very core.

Would it be right to disapprove of every stranger in the world? I don’t think that matters. If one did, that would be the way it is. I guess I am just at the point in my life where I realize I have no choice but to literally admit that being different brings me a deep inner pain. Many times, it doesn’t show up in my behavior; I’ve learned to be so private that my private reality is virtually undetectable by others. I’ll only admit to an anxiety attack in front of anyone if it is truly necessary because to admit my pain to anyone is a level of vulnerability I don’t care to show. Being different can bring a myriad of unneeded analytical soliloquies, general dismissal, and maybe even a tone of ungratefulness.

People who are different may be considered eccentrics, and they bring joy and entertainment to the working, middle and upper

classes and, if clever enough, to the elites, as well. And I'm not sure I like that.

III

I don't know what I would do without this city. I don't know what I would do without the deep blue sea that exists just a few miles away, polluted, forced to coexist amidst industrial ports and a valuable tourist-friendly harbor. It's forced to house all the poor fish who can barely see where they are going in its murky, contaminated water. I still believe the sea is blue though. Dirt can't compete with the sky once you get a hundred miles above it, let alone a thousand, and far away, out into the Atlantic.

IV

Death plagues Baltimore. On the grey, misty days you can feel it in the particles of the air. Ghosts roam freely in old live-work industrial buildings, tormenting tenants made aware of the tales of previous renters' suicides and the slave quarters in the basements of old, inexpensive, fixer-upper Victorian homes. On certain days, a blanket of an eerie, unsettling vibration cloaks the city, and everyone shuts themselves in their homes, ill at ease without knowing why. People are only aware of it because our neighbors and friends describe similar uneasiness, making each other realize that it's not in our minds. Other times, the deep blue sea brings in offputting coastal weather, like high winds and several consecutive days of rain. I love rainy days and temperamental weather. You know what month it is by the state of the winds and rains, and you know when the ancestors are angered during the hazy fog. Baltimore is unlike any other place. You have to stay here and learn about this city's moods because it has very little to do with people.

Outside of the past abuses of power during the Confederate days and Jim Crow, policy, legislation and internal community violence, the city has a life of its own.

I don't know if all cities have lives. I've been to many, and some feel manufactured — the parks, the lakes, the experience. But Baltimore was around when America had no identity, and the land crafted the people's industry, choices in farming, and how they built their homes due to seasonal weather. Baltimore gave form to this country, and because of that, it has some issues. Issues with the choices its people have made in the past, issues with the death of slaves, issues with the treatment of the deep blue sea, and a steadfast identity that doesn't have anything to do with man.

V

In (Chapbook One), I was writing as a person full of regret. But now, more importantly, I'm learning my pain had nothing to do with anyone but me. I've been wracking my brain for a little while on what to do about it since I just recently realized it. Being who I am is painful on some levels — and I'm sure others feel this way — but this way of thinking is precisely the problem with my inner narrative, worrying if others feel the same.

What is it about my pain that has been able to sit so neatly and concealed within me for so long? I used to cry and confess, "I'm a freak!" But all I got was pacifying comfort. I didn't want that. I either wanted some sort of reality-based agreement, a way out, or a way to change.

VI

Preoccupation is a wonderful elixir. I was so preoccupied with writing about death-dreams and what happened to me in (Chapbook One), that it gave me the opportunity to avoid how I was truly feeling. I lost my best friend, and all I knew how to manage was to write an intriguing story. Who knows, maybe I did

a good job, but I don't know if I was in the right state of reality to understand what had really happened. I was very young, 27 when it all began (two years before I began these stories). Now, nearly five years later, I will always announce that I am none the wiser, and my mind is clearer. And nearly 1,800 days has given me some leverage of understanding.

I like to write the saying, "it is of no consequence," but maybe this time, the consequence is that I have lived through some history and survived the loss of someone I loved. I'm no longer doused so deeply in the realm of rejection and despair, inexperience, PTSD, and idealism. I can communicate with more crispness.

With all of this said, I love to read (Chapbook One) because it is full of imagination, or maybe a fanciful version of an accurate perception of my experience. I lived in a surreal world of youthful desperation, which I believe I wrote about with such beauty. That's all a writer can really hope for.

Jordannah Elizabeth Graham is a multidisciplinary artist, journalist, author, and independent scholar. She has contributed to national and international conversations on music, race, and justice, notably as a guest journalist at Harvard University's Black Lives Matter: Music, Race and Justice Conference. She has lectured at institutions including De Montfort University (UK), Maryland Institute College of Art, Pratt Institute, the Center for New Music, and numerous other universities and arts organizations around the world.

Her debut book, *Don't Lose Track Vol. 1: 40 Essays, Articles and Q&As* was published by Zero Books in 2016. She wrote three children's books for Hachette Book Group; *She Raised Her Voice!* (2021), *Astrology for Black Girls* (2022) and *A Child's Introduction to Hip Hop* (2023). She is also the founder of the literary organization Publik / Private (established in 2014) and its publishing arm, Publik / Private Small Press (established in 2017), which released The Warmest Low series.

Jordannah's writing has appeared in a wide range of esteemed publications, including O, The Oprah Magazine, Cosmopolitan, The Village Voice, LA Weekly, New York Amsterdam News and many others.

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